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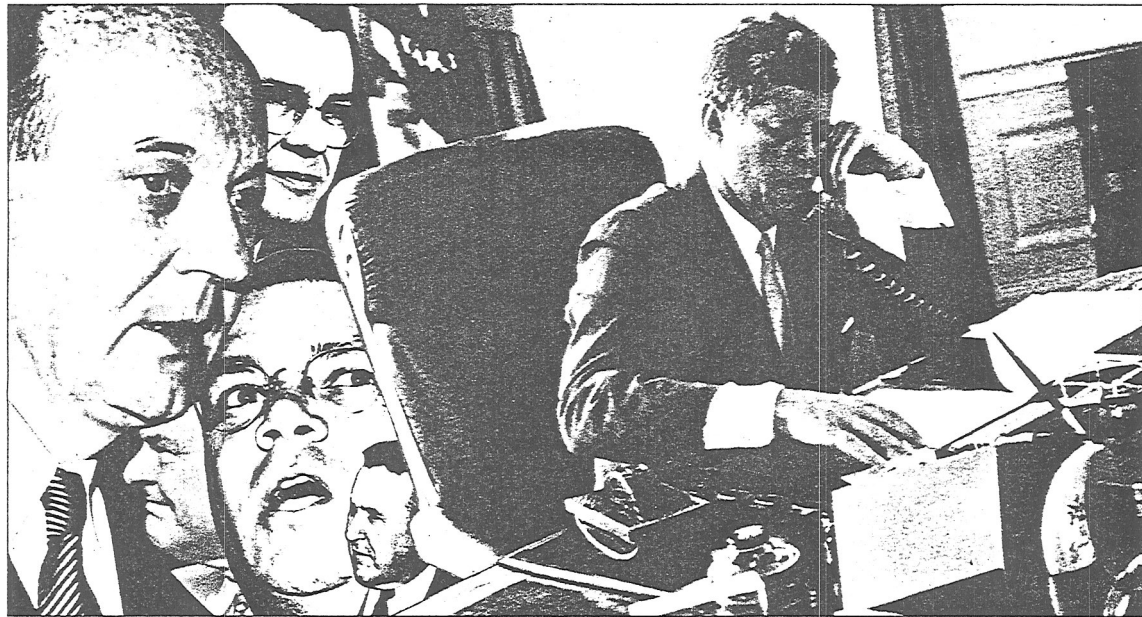
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BOOK WEEK

JUNE 11, 1967

The
Washington
Post



COMMAND DECISIONS

By Milton Viorst

TO MOVE A NATION: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy. By Roger Hilsman. Illustrated. Doubleday. 602 pp. \$6.95.

Roger Hilsman is no dove. He's a tough-minded intellectual who served under President Kennedy in high posts in the State Department. He admired Kennedy's diplomacy, not because Kennedy always made the right decisions but because he applied—except, perhaps, during the first Cuban crisis—rigorous intellectual processes to reach them. In this excellent book, Hilsman reviews critically the diplomatic policies in which he was himself involved. He writes with authority, offering fresh insights and information on crises ranging from Cuba to Malaysia. But the casual reader will be forgiven for skipping to the chapters on the crisis that really concerns us most. Hilsman never quarreled with the objective of defeating the Vietcong rebels. What horrifies him about the Vietnamese war is the sequence of mindless decisions, most of them taken since Kennedy's death, which seem not only to preclude suppression of the rebellion but have managed, at the same time, to alienate our allies, reduce to rubble an

already wretched land, and bring the United States to the edge of World War III.

Though he may be unduly quick to understand, Hilsman does not forgive Kennedy his mistakes, of which he considers the most flagrant, in a policy-making sense, the President's failure to replace his Secretary of State when it became clear that Dean Rusk would not accept responsibility for the advocacy of political and diplomatic action in the on-going policy debates with the military. Furthermore, Hilsman says, Rusk would not back his own people when they felt compelled to take on the generals. Hilsman says that when he was promoted from Director of Intelligence and Research to Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, Rusk solemnly directed him to cease irritating the Pentagon by intruding into military and strategic matters. Since the country's Far Eastern problems are largely strategic, Hilsman wondered what the job was that Rusk expected him to do. Then he received a phone call from the White House in which he was instructed to disregard Rusk. "The President," he was told, "wants you to understand that it was precisely because you have stood up to the Defense

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Department that you were chosen, and that he expects you to continue."

Hilsman says Kennedy kept Rusk because to sack him would have reflected poorly on his own judgment. Instead, he sacrificed the Undersecretary, Chester Bowles, who alone in the Department had fresh ideas about the conduct of foreign policy and who was, despite the stories leaked to the press at the time, an excellent administrator as well. There may have been other justification for firing Bowles, but if, as Hilsman suggests, the principal motive was to warn the State Department of the President's dissatisfaction, it was a curiously perverse way to go about it, indeed.

But as long as Kennedy lived, the government had adequate substitutes for Rusk in the debates over policy. Kennedy himself, backed by his team of White House advisers, served as a counterforce to the military. It was in the next Administration that the country paid the price of Kennedy's dereliction, when a new President sought not a diversity of opinion but a consensus that matched his own predispositions. Thus Rusk emerged into his own, a major figure in the cabinet, characterized not by a strong will but by a ready acquiescence to the will of others.

Hilsman does not dispute the official Rusk-Pentagon contention that the Vietnamese war is the product of aggression from the North. But he adds (in a footnote, oddly) a fundamental modification:

Even though Hanoi triggered the Vietcong insurrection, . . . it should be noted that they would not have been successful in starting the insurrection if there had not been a substantial core of resistance already in existence among the people of South Vietnam and a framework of native Communist leadership there. As it happened, Hanoi did fire the starting gun; Hanoi did supply the key items of supply; Hanoi did exercise command and overall direction. But it is possible that the Vietcong insurrection may have occurred anyway, even if Hanoi had not existed.

From the Pentagon's own statistics, Hilsman shows that almost all of the Vietcong's forces are recruited and almost all of their supplies acquired in the South. Yet Rusk and the military take the position that the Vietcong are not indigenous to South Vietnam and that the war would be over tomorrow if North Vietnam gave up its aggressive designs. For them, if Hanoi had not existed, it would have had to be invented.

It follows, then, that Rusk and the generals, despite all that Kennedy and Johnson have proclaimed to the contrary, never really believed that the source of the violence in Vietnam was political. General Earle G. Wheeler, whom President Johnson later made chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, even had the candor to declare: "It is fashionable in some quarters to say that the problems in Southeast Asia are primarily political and economic rather than military. I do not agree. The essence of the problem in Vietnam is military." The consequence of this kind of thinking has been the toleration of unpopular political regimes in Saigon, indifference to reform efforts in the countryside, and the adoption of military tactics which are, to be sure, a change from those pursued on the Western front in 1945 but still totally inadequate for dealing with native guerrillas.

Still, despite the spread of Vietcong control, the Pentagon—wedded to McNamara's computerized view of the world—managed somehow to persuade itself that it was winning the war. "*Ah, les statistiques*," exclaimed a Vietnamese general whom Hilsman quotes. "Your Secretary of Defense loves statistics. We Vietnamese can

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give him all he wants. If you want them to go up, they will go up. If you want them to go down, they will go down." The climax to this kind of dream analysis occurred in October, 1963, when McNamara announced that by the end of the year "one thousand U.S. military personnel assigned to South Vietnam can be withdrawn." Not since MacArthur promised to get the boys home by Christmas has a military prediction turned out to be so disastrous.

Faced with their own rosy estimates and simultaneous failure in the ground fighting, American generals withdrew further and further from the reality of local conditions, Hilsman maintains, to the prepared positions they knew best. They wanted to drop bombs. The targets were divided into three groups: the Vietcong emplacements in South Vietnam, the infiltration trails which passed through Laos from the North, and the war-making potential of North Vietnam itself. That bombing had failed to make a major difference in Korea, where the war was at least "conventional," did not upset the generals. Bombing was a clean way for Americans to make their strength felt in Vietnam—and the military was sure that it could, thereby, end the trouble once and for all.

The argument over intensive bombing of South Vietnam, Hilsman points out, went to the heart of the disagreement over the nature of the war. In a guerrilla struggle, he says, the best weapon is the knife; the next is the rifle. Bombing and artillery fire are the worst. Indiscriminate killing can only detract from the objective of winning popular allegiance. But the generals, he says, were impatient with the argument that bombing would turn an indifferent native population into a hostile one. As General Harkins, predecessor of Westmoreland, declared in a debate over the political consequences of napalming the villages: "It really puts the fear of God into the Vietcong. And that is what counts."

Hilsman says a powerful counter-argument was also raised to bombing the North. All of North Vietnam, he writes, had only a few dozen industrial targets worth hitting. Once they were destroyed, Hanoi would no longer be deterred from moving its 250,000 regular troops into South Vietnam. China, furthermore, would be tempted to intervene as American power advanced northward. And, of all arguments the most compelling: the North Vietnamese contribution was not a significant factor in supporting the Vietcong rebellion. But in advocating attacks on the North, General LeMay, the Air Force chief, could still maintain: "We are swatting flies, when we should be going after the manure pile."

As for bombing the infiltration routes, Kennedy himself made the most prophetic remark. "No matter what goes wrong or whose fault it really is," he told Hilsman, "the argument will be made that the Communists have stepped up their infiltration and we can't win unless we hit the North. Those trails are a built-in excuse for failure and a built-in argument for escalation." Kennedy understood better than anyone else that, given the crush of intra-governmental pressure politics, he was in a serious and dangerous dilemma.

The generals, Hilsman says, were in a very real sense seeking to blackmail Kennedy. They complained incessantly of having been humiliated in Korea by the seedy requirements of international politics and deprived of a

victory that was rightfully theirs. Within the Joint Chiefs of Staff, some of the generals maintained so vociferously that they would never again submit to such limitations that they became known as the "Never Again" club. They might consent to bombing, as a sanitary form of warfare. But they said they would not fight on the ground unless it was clearly understood beforehand that they would be free, if necessary, to go all the way. And that, indisputably, included using the "nukes."

In discussing the realities of making foreign policy, Hilsman makes clear that Kennedy, whatever his theoretical powers and responsibilities, had to take into account the dynamics of the contest for influence which exists within the government. The military has its own constituency, in Congress and the press and the electorate. A President—particularly one with a flank weakened by the passivity of the State Department—ignores it at his own peril. This does not mean that the country is in danger of being taken over by a junta, any more than by another of the vested interests in government. But it does mean that Kennedy had to make greater and greater concessions to the military in order to retain fundamental control over the conduct of the war. This may be what Schlesinger calls the "politics of invertebrate," though Kennedy undoubtedly recognized it as the steps in a trend. With each concession, his own freedom of action was irreversibly diminished.

Kennedy's objective was to keep the country's hand in Vietnam, while avoiding at all costs an irrevocable national commitment. He understood the moral distinction between an American contingent of 15,000 men, backing a war effort of the South Vietnamese, and an American army of several hundred thousand, taking over the war and fighting it as their own. A major American army had to be taken as evidence of Saigon's failure to retain popular support, which in turn deprived the United States of the real justification for its presence. To the end of the Administration, Robert Kennedy argued for an open-minded review of the American commitment. But perhaps by that time President Kennedy had already gone too far to turn back.

Hilsman resigned shortly after the assassination. He was disturbed at Johnson's ardent embrace of the military's doctrines on escalation. He argued himself for conserving the threat of escalation to prevent the Communists from expanding the war. "In my judgment," he wrote to the new President, "significant action against North Vietnam that is taken before we have demonstrated success in our counter-insurgency program will be interpreted by the Communists as an act of desperation, and will, therefore, not be effective in persuading the North Vietnamese to cease and desist." The words, as understatement, scarcely do justice to the horror that has ensued, but the President presses relentlessly on. What disturbed Hilsman, however, even more than the new policies themselves was the abdication of the intellect involved in selecting them. After three years with Kennedy, he was shocked at the reversion to patriotic clichés and self-righteous jingoism. Hilsman has since taken a teaching post at Columbia and signed up in Robert Kennedy's shadow cabinet.

According to a story out of the State Department, the impending publication of this book has confirmed the old diplomatic hands in their distaste for outsiders in their councils. "You can be sure I won't write my memoirs when I leave this job," Rusk has been heard to say to a colleague. Memoirs are now considered bad taste among the professionals. As for Rusk, who does not lack taste, it is known he has been awaiting publication day with some trepidation. Hilsman's book—though scholarly in method and sober in tone, the antithesis of diatribe—will confirm that he had good cause.

Milton Viorst is a writer specializing in Washington politics whose book about the Republican Party and the puritan ethic will be published later this year.